



Date and Time: Tuesday, May 16, 2023 11:29:00AM PDT

Job Number: 197213361

Document (1)

1. [*Bunker mentality; Covid-19 sparks second 'doom boom'*](#)

Client/Matter: -None-

Search Terms: "doom" and ("climate" or "eco")

Search Type: Terms and Connectors

Narrowed by:

Content Type
News

Narrowed by
Sources: National Post (f/k/a The Financial Post)(Canada);
Timeline: Jan 01, 2018 to May 15, 2023; All Content Types:
News; Geography by Document: North America;
Geography by Document: Canada

Bunker mentality; Covid-19 sparks second 'doom boom'

National Post (f/k/a The Financial Post) (Canada)

August 31, 2020 Monday

National Edition

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Section: NEWS; Pg. A6

Length: 935 words

Byline: Luke Mintz, National Post

Body

In March, as COVID-19 made its journey around the world, stockpiling took hold in supermarkets.

Hand sanitizer, bleach and dried pasta were in short supply, and it became famously difficult to find toilet paper. But even at the peak of demand, only a tiny percentage of the population engaged in hoarding or panic buying. It was hardly 28 Days Later.

But a few dozen middle-class American families reacted in an altogether more extreme way: rushing to buy access to underground bunkers at Fortitude Ranch, a growing community of doomsday preppers. Established a few years ago by former air force intelligence officer Drew Miller, who has a PhD from Harvard in operations research, the 50-acre ranch is guarded by watchtowers and barbed-wire fences. It stockpiles tinned food, face masks, toilet paper, antibiotics and - this being America - guns and ammunition. Their experts track "trigger events" - cataclysmic incidents that might spark a collapse of society.

At various other bunker sites, a handful of families even decided it was the right moment to descend underground. Most emerged after just a few weeks, once they realized that COVID was not causing the sky to fall. But their willingness to abandon their day-to-day lives at a moment's notice is evidence of a "second **doom** boom," according to archaeologist and urban explorer Bradley Garrett, who spent three years meeting doomsday preppers for his book, *Bunker: Building for the End Times*.

"In 2020, we've had a taste of what it means to have our lives upended," says Garrett from his home in Los Angeles. "We've built a society now that is very dependent upon international trade and fragile supply lines."

We have long harboured a morbid fascination with how our world might end. As early as 1200 BCE in Cappadocia, in what is now Turkey, the Hittites carved subterranean shelters into the sides of volcanoes. In the Roman city of Pompeii, a wealthy resident chiselled a hidden chamber beneath his villa, which was preserved by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE. In the 19th century, the dark writing of H.G. Wells reflected a fear that new technology might usher in the end of the world as people knew it.

But the first real "**doom** boom" arrived in the 1960s, when President John F. Kennedy urged Americans to prepare for the threat of nuclear Armageddon by building fallout shelters in their gardens. The British government also built bunkers to protect officials in the event of a Soviet nuclear strike.

Now Garrett thinks we have reached our second period of existential dread. Cold War-era shelters are being sold - only for them to be snapped up by modern "dread merchants," as Garrett calls them, who kit them out and sell them on to super-rich clients from New York and Silicon Valley (plus a few Europeans). Some are open to those of more

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modest means: a bare-bones membership at Fortitude Ranch, which entitles you to a dormitory bunk-bed in the event of the apocalypse, costs US\$1,000 per year.

Larry Hall, an ex-defence contractor, purchased a former U.S. government Cold War shelter for \$300,000 in 2008. Built in Kansas in the 1960s to withstand a nuclear missile 100 times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Nagasaki, by 2010 Hall had converted it into a luxury shelter for the super-rich, in which 75 people can theoretically weather five years underground - after which they would emerge to rebuild society.

Garrett received rare access to the condo.

"When the lift doors opened, I couldn't suppress a laugh," he writes. "In front of us, four storeys underground in central Kansas, was a supermarket complete with shopping baskets, shelves, cold cabinets, an espresso machine. Like Willy Wonka ... Larry flipped a light switch to illuminate a 50,000-gallon indoor swimming pool flanked by a rock waterfall."

Tyler Allen, a housing developer from Florida, paid \$3 million for one of Hall's flats. He told The New Yorker in 2017: "They don't put tinfoil on your head if you're the president and you go to Camp David (the ultra-secure presidential residence in Maryland). But they do if you have the means and you take steps to protect your family should a problem occur."

Garrett also gained insight into what is keeping the world's elites awake at night. Many of the preppers mentioned the potential for catastrophic climate change, while the threat of a more severe pandemic now looms large.

"This is only a midlevel crisis," says Garrett of COVID-19. "If the lethality rate of this virus was 10 per cent, instead of less than one per cent, (prepping) would be extremely important."

The preppers also have a great deal to say about artificial intelligence, described by Toby Ord's *The Precipice* as an "existential threat."

It is easy to roll your eyes at the eccentricity. Pessimists have always been among us, from the internet doomsters who predicted the world would end suddenly in 2012 because of a bizarre interpretation of the Mayan calendar, to the person who stands on the corner declaring: "The end is nigh." And that was exactly the sort of "paranoid fringe culture" Garrett expected to find.

But his mind changed.

While he still thinks the elites spending millions harbour an "overly pessimistic view," he was impressed by lower-key, cheaper versions of prepping: communities where people assembled to teach each other basic survival skills; how to grow vegetables and mend clothes, rather than going underground.

If we work together, he thinks, there is no reason that a future global catastrophe has to become an apocalypse. Well, that's something.

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Graphic

Photos: Nicholas Kamm , Afp Via Getty Images; Survival bunkers - like this one in Mathias, West Virginia - are being built by 'preppers' across the United States.; A storage room in one of the survival bunkers at Fortitude Ranch is stocked with food and other supplies.; A guard tower blends in with the scenery at the Fortitude Ranch doomsday preppers community in West Virginia.The Fortitude Ranch compound includes a smokehouse, solar panels and a greenhouse as well as a large central building.;

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: News

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: COVID CORONAVIRUS (91%); COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS (90%); FOOD SHORTAGES (90%); INFECTIOUS DISEASE (90%); SURVIVALISM (90%); COLD WAR (78%); HOARDING (78%); PANIC BUYING (78%); NUCLEAR WEAPONS (75%); WEAPONS & ARMS (75%); AIR FORCES (70%); ANTHROPOLOGY & ARCHAEOLOGY (69%); VOLCANIC ERUPTIONS (66%); WEALTHY PEOPLE (60%); ARCHAEOLOGY (50%); march,journey,around,world,stockpiling,supermarkets (%)

Industry: FOOD SHORTAGES (90%); PASTA & NOODLES (78%); NUCLEAR WEAPONS (75%); GROCERY STORES & SUPERMARKETS (73%); AIR FORCES (70%); ANTIBIOTICS (54%)

Person: JOHN F KENNEDY (50%)

Geographic: CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (93%)

Load-Date: August 31, 2020

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